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ABSTRACT

As a result of the 1976 Educational Accountability Act, minimal competency tests were developed for grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 by the Florida State Board of Education. Results of the first administration of the 11th grade tests showed that the failure rate for minority black students was much higher than for white students. Results of the tests administered in the second year of testing were better for black and white students. The results of tests administered to all grades tested follow the same pattern as the 11th grade tests. There is no definite reason for the increased scores in the second year of the minimal competency testing program. However, new items were added to the second year tests and remedial and compensatory education programs were implemented. Florida citizens have had varying reactions to the testing program, but most have been supportive of it. There have been some legal actions challenging the tests. One such case involves minority students. Recommendations have been made to the Board of Education for improving both the way the test is constructed and the way it is administered. (PR)

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The Florida Competency Testing Program: Results and Reactions

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Background and Objectives

The Florica approach to competency based education is the result of an evolutionary development of educational accountability laws and policies which began in the late 1960's.

The 1976 Educational Accountability Act, the latest revision of the accountability laws, is quite specific in its intent and requirements. It emphasized the collection of data at the district and state levels, student performance on specific minimum standards for purposes of promotion and graduation, and required high school students to be functionally literate before graduation. The law passed unanimously due to the popularity around the state of its concepts.

Instrumentation

The 1976 Act emphasized the specification of Minimum Student Performance Standards (MSPS) and measurement to determine their mastery. Thus, the testing program necessarily became criterion-referenced in design.

Standards were developed during the 1976-77 school year and were adopted by the State Board of Education in April 1977. The standards are simply broad performance objectives which usually have from one to six sub-skills.

The assessment program developed test specifications to match the minimal objectives and developed its own tests through contracts with state universities and extensive involvement of committees of local school teachers and curriculum specialists. These tests were all criterion-referenced with multiple items measuring each MSPS.

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In the case of the functional literacy test required for high school graduation, literacy was defined as the application of the basic skills to practical, everyday situations. The literacy test items were developed with the assistance of Educational Testing Service and revised by the assessment staff as necessary.

Methodology

The statewide assessment tests were prepared for administration through a contact with Westinghouse Learning Corporation. The tests were administered in October 1977 and October 1978 at grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. Students failing one or both parts of the literacy test are permitted to retake the test in October or April of each year.

Results were reported for each student, mastery of the performance standards was indicated in addition to a total item score and item response data.

Mastery of a skill was determined by whether or not a student correctly answered a minimum number of items for the skill. Most item sets had four or five items but the range was from two to fifteen. Mastery of a standard, likewise, was defined as correctly answering a minimum number of the test questions for that standard. In the case of the literacy tests, which has sixty questions for each of the two standards, the minimum number of correct answers is forty-two. These criterion levels were established based upon (1) probabilities of guessing, (2) practicality of length of tests, (3) past experiences with skill mastery on previous assessments in Florida, (4) methods used on assessment programs in other states and commercially available tests, and (5) input from the assessment program advisory committee. The passing scores were upheld by the action of the State Board of Education in August 1978, after a lengthy public debate.

Results

The results of the 1977 statewide assessment were dramatic. In the grade eleven literacy test, 36% of the students failed the math standard and 8% failed the communications standard. The failure rates for minority black students were much higher than for white students. Seventy-seven percent of the black students failed the math test while twenty-five percent failed the functional communications test.

In the basic skills area, many students did not meet the criterion. If one assumes all MSPS must be mastered because they are "minimal" the results are disappointing. As Figure 1 shows, all students did not achieve minimal expectations.

FIGURE 1

Percent of Students Achieving From 76-100% of the MSPS in October 1977

	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 8	Grade 11
Math	77	60	48	56
Reading	73	69	54	76
Writing	47	74	71	18

Results of the October 1978 test administration were much better. Figure 2 reveals the percentage of passing scores for white and black eleventh graders on the mathematics and communications literacy tests. Comparisons to the data given above demonstrate that gains were made in both areas.

FIGURE 2

Percent of Students Passing the Mathematics and Communications Literacy Tests in October 1978, by Ethnic Group, Eleventh Grade

	Mathematics	Communications
White	83%	99%
Black	40%	89%
All	74%	97%

As can be seen, the passing rates for both white and black students increased, but minority students still are not equal in performance to the majority students.

Figure 3 shows the results of the literacy test for twelfth graders who were taking the test for the second time. The same general patterns hold as with the high school juniors. While exact data is not available, it is believed that somewhere between 80 and 90 percent of the original group of juniors passed the literacy requirement in two tries.

FIGURE 3

Percent of Students Passing the Mathematics and Communications Literacy Tests in October 1978, by Ethnic Group, Twelfth Grade

	Mathematics	Communications
White	80	95
Black	54	78
All	69	88

The results of the basic skills tests at all four grades likewise show an improvement. Figure 4 demonstrates this through a display of the percentage of students achieving at least 76% of the minimum standards (as in Figure 1 for 1977). The patterns of performance are generally the same as were seen in 1977 with grade eleven writing performance being lowest.

FIGURE 4

Percent of Students Achieving From 76-100% of the MSPS in October 1978

	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 8	Grade 11
Math	82	62	67	63
Reading	80	84	72	85
Writing	76	77	76	39

It is not known exactly what factors have contributed to the increased performance. The remedial education programs implemented around the state have undoubtedly had an effect as has a general increase in student and teacher seriousness and devotion to task. However, the Assessment Section also renewed the tests through the insertion of about 40% new items. The items were replaced through techniques intended to maintain the difficulty levels, but until more precise post hoc equating studies can be done, it will not be known exactly how much gain is attributable to differences in the test forms. Evidence to date indicates the gains are not due to changes in the test items.

Reactions to the Florida program have been mixed. The newspaper and television editorials have been overwhelmingly supportive of the minimal competency testing program. One newspaper went so far as to create weekly series called "The Adventures of Skill Stalker" which provided practice exercises on a different literacy skill each week.

The Florida Legislature responded to the situation by initiating and then expanding a state compensatory education act, funded in 1977 at $26.5 million. These monies are awarded to all sixty-seven districts on the basis of the statewide assessment scores in the basic skills areas. Districts are given great freedom in designing the appropriate remedial programs although they, at the same time, must commit themselves to evaluate their efforts.

Florida citizens have been supportive of the program also despite the large failure rates in some areas. One telephone poll taken by a newspaper chain revealed 88% of the respondents supported the use of a high school competency test. Even among minorities, support was expressed by 75% of the respondents. This support has continued even through the second round of testing in October 1978. However, as with any program, there are opponents who are vocal.

The first legal scirmish was held over the issue of the "secret" nature of test development activities. The plaintiff in this action was an official of the Dade County (Miami) branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The requested injunction was refused and the case was continued

In a second case, a citizen filed a legal complaint accusing the Department of Education of improperly implementing the test scoring procedures. The Department lost the case and was forced to ask the Board of Education to retroactively approve the scoring procedures in August 1978. This was done, but now these actions have been further challenged by a ruling of the District Court of Appeals on an unrelated case. The legislature will have to resolve the issue in its 1979 session.

A third legal confrontation was held in the summer and early fall of 1978 over the reasonableness of the scoring procedures adopted by the Department and ratified retroactively by the Board of Education in August 1978. This battle

was largely fought on technical grounds about whether or not the Department had correctly assessed the "economic impact" of the testing program. The Department won the challenge but the case has been appealed.

The first major legal action has now been initiated in Hillsborough County on behalf of ten minority students. This case is being brought against the state by the Bay Area Legal Services and the Harvard Center for Law and Education.

The case is very complex and addresses many issues, but the dominant ones can be reduced to:

1) Are the tests valid?
2) Are the tests reliable?
3) Are the tests culturally biased?
4) Was there enough lead time provided students before the requirement was imposed?

This case will be heard sometime in April and May 1979, and the impact of any ruling will be dramatic in its consequences.

Under normal circumstances, these issues would be explained and defended herein. However, because the case is still pending, this will not be done. The Department of Education's position is that the testing program was properly implemented and is psychometrically defensible.

Lastly, the State Board of Education in its deliberations in August 1978 appointed a committee to investigate the entire testing issue. This committee was chaired by then-Secretary of State Jesse McCrary and became known, of course, by that name.

The McCrary Committee reported to the State Board of Education early in 1979 and the Board voted to "accept" the report.

The recommendations of the Committee centered around a delay of one year in implementation of the literacy requirement, changing the grade levels at which all assessment tests are administered, expanding the content of the test to include other subject areas, and tightening district compensatory education requirements. These changes will be addressed by the legislature during its 1979 session, and it is not known how many will be adopted, if any.

Significance

The Florida effort in competency based instructional programs in the basic skills was not the first such program in the U.S. However, it is the first system utilizing a state controlled test to be implemented. The results have been dramatic, therefore, because of the failure rates and because of their visability.

If Florida is able to succeed, advocates of such programs around the nation will be encouraged. If Florida's program fails, it may lead to removal of some other programs among the thirty-seven or so states which have begun implementation of similar programs. For this reason, the Florida experience is going to be critical and much will be learned from it.